

10 noteworthy books on conservation and the environment from 2019

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FULL TEXT

•2019 produced a number of notable books on the environment, ranging from the memoirs of researchers and journalists to how-to guides and prescient novels.

•Here's a sample of what was published in the past year.

•They cut across a variety of environment-related themes, though climate change is a common point of meditation for many of the authors on the list.

•Inclusion on this list does not imply Mongabay's endorsement of a book's content; the views in the books are those of the authors and not necessarily Mongabay.

Grappling with the challenges of minimizing carbon footprints, memoirs of careers spent on the frontlines of conservation and stark warnings about the future inhabitability of our world, the roster of environment-related books published in 2019 covered a wide swath of pressing themes.

We've included 10 released by mainstream publishing houses that promise to inspire, educate and prepare readers as we head into the third decade of the 21st century. They tackle climate change, altered marine environments and the global loss of species, but of course none of these issues exists in a vacuum. The challenges are all related, and the authors whose books made the list have worked to tease apart that complexity.

1. The Snow Leopard Project And Other Adventures in War Zone Conservation

Beginning in 2006, Alex Dehgan spearheaded an effort to create the first national park in Afghanistan. Dehgan, an evolutionary biologist who was working for the Wildlife Conservation Society at the time, brings to life the effort that became a beacon of hope in spite of ongoing conflict.

"I felt that there was so much more to Afghanistan than the way it is portrayed on the evening news —a dusty, depressing landscape of pain, conflict, tribalism, and hopelessness," he told Mongabay in April. "I wanted to show for both conservation, and for Afghanistan, that there could be optimism for the future of the country, for its people, and for its wildlife."

2. Live Sustainably Now: A Low-Carbon Vision of the Good Life

Part how-to guide, part entertaining memoir, Karl Coplan's new book brings readers along for his journey into trimming his own carbon footprint. The Pace University law professor acknowledges the struggles inherent in minimizing one's own impact in a modern society, but he also demonstrates the fulfillment to be had in meeting those challenges head on and devising creative solutions to address them.

3. Rainforest: Dispatches from Earth's Most Vital Frontlines

Like many of the authors whose books are on this list, Tony Juniper brings firsthand experience to his subject matter—in this case, the world’s rainforests. The outlook for this biome can seem bleak, especially given the recent surge in deforestation in many of the world’s tropical forests, and Juniper’s decades in the field bear out the hurdles conservationists face. But he also lays out the case for using every strategy at our disposal, from high-level agreements to supporting indigenous management, to protect the forests that, he argues—and many agree—are so essential to our own existence.

4. The Outlaw Ocean: Journeys across the last untamed frontier

Investigative journalist Ian Urbina spent more than 3 years at sea with fishers all over the world to understand the connection between the epidemic of overfishing across the world’s oceans and the human rights abuses that are all too common in the industry. His reporting, which first appeared as a series in *The New York Times*, reveals the lawlessness of high seas and that the fates of the people who work it as well as the life that lives beneath are intertwined.

“To me, the problem is an out-of-sight, out-of-mind reality that results in an utter lack of governance in a sprawling space that has for too long simply been thought of as a space—rarely a workplace,” Urbina told Conservation International. “There is a long cultural and intellectual history behind thinking of the sea and maritime as another world where things are different.”

5. Grinnell: America’s Environmental Pioneer and His Restless Drive to Save the West

George Grinnell’s views on the American West were shaped by the time he spent there, steeped in the landscape and the cultures that precede the United States’ domination of the region. Along the way, biographer John Taliaferro writes, Grinnell also became an advocate for its protection in the face of “progress.” In doing so, he helped ignite a passion for conservation that continues to this day.

6. The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming

From the first page of his new book, David Wallace-Wells describes a perilous world that we’re striding closer to each day in what reviewers call “terrifying” and “riveting” prose. Wallace-Wells examines the future for humanity as the impacts of climate change deepen, and in his view, few aspects of our lives will remain untouched. There’s room for optimism in the future, but only if we act, and this book tells us why we must. As the reviewer for *The Economist* wrote, “Some readers will find Mr Wallace-Wells’s outline of possible futures alarmist. He is indeed alarmed. You should be, too.”

7. Losing Earth: A Recent History

This retrospective looks back to the scientists who first alerted humanity to the dangers of climate change in the late 1970s and the 1980s. Journalist Nathaniel Rich first reported the series for *The New York Times Magazine*. It details how a handful of researchers initially realized our own role in climate change. There were missed opportunities to stave off the coming storm along the way, to be sure. Still unanswered is the question about whether we’ll learn from those missteps, or blindly barrel toward an uncertain and perilous future.

8. Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?

In yet another volume to explore humanity’s relationship with Earth’s climate, Bill McKibben—the first popular author to sound the warning on climate change with *The End of Nature* in 1989—follows the obstinacy of ideology and how it has precluded meaningful action. The details are frustrating. But McKibben also finds reason to hope, believing that the future of the world and our place depends on how we respond now.

9. Horizon

In the only work of fiction on our list, writer John Lanchester has put together a novel with perhaps the most contemporary of themes. Central to the plot is the wall in the imagined future that projects the United Kingdom

from rising sea levels. Seemingly insurmountable political divisiveness conspires to create a world that's suspiciously familiar in prevailing sentiment if not the details of everyday life, in which outsiders are viewed as enemies and our very existence seems under threat.

Banner image of a glacier in Iceland by John C. Cannon/Mongabay.

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